Survival of the Witty-est: Creating Resilience Through Humor

with
Steven M. Sultanoff, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist
HumorMatters
1 League #60961
Irvine, CA 92602
(714) 665-8801
(ssultanoff@humormatters.com)
www.humormatters.com
www.mirthmatters.com

The Experience and Therapeutic Value of Humor:
✓ Laughter
✓ Mirth
✓ Wit

Creating Resilience with Humor
Fundamentals of Resilience
Characteristics of Resilient People
Psychological Antibodies
Humor and Resilience
Fundamentals of Resilience

What Is Resilience?

*Resilience*—The ability to spring back to a former position or shape or to resist the toxins that are attempting to move one off one's center. The ability to adapt to life's tasks.

---

Fundamentals of Resilience

Why Do We Want It?

The Psychological Immune System:
- Protects us from psychological toxins
- Produces "antibodies" to help protect us from psychological toxins

Psychological Resilience--
- Emotional self management
- Cognitive self management-Belief systems
- Psychological immune system
- Psychological inoculation
- Capacity to rebound from stress, peer pressure, failures, disappointments

---

Characteristics of Resilient People

Resilient Individuals remain centered in the face of life's challenges.

They are less likely to lose their heads!
How do Resilient People Remain Resilient?

Resilient Individuals have a sunny side up personality with an abundance of psychological antibodies. This allows them to disperse antibodies as needed to react to the frying pan moments in the environment.

Resilient Individuals do not totally crack up when their life seems fried.

Psychological Resilience/Immune System

Psychological “Immune System”

Emotional Resilience:
- Reduce emotional distress
- Inoculate against emotional toxins

Cognitive Resilience:
- Reduce negative thinking
- Enhance positive thinking
- Shift perspective
- Inoculate against cognitive toxins (e.g., the negative thoughts of others)

Psychological Antibodies Bolster Resilience

Psychological “Antibodies” (emotional and cognitive)

Emotional Antibodies:
- Enhance emotional regulation
- Keep one centered
- Facilitate pro-action versus re-action

Cognitive Antibodies
- Reduce negative thinking/depowering language
- Enhance positive thinking
- Foster appreciation of self, others, and world
- Embrace Choice
- Shift perspective
The Impact of Humor on Resilience
The Psychological Immune System
Humor Fortifies Resilience:
Boosts Psychological "Antibodies"
Emotional Impact: Mirth
  Dissolves emotional distress
  Inoculates against emotional toxins
Cognitive Impact: Wit
  Counteracts negative thinking
  Enhances positive thinking
  Inoculates against cognitive toxins
  Reframes attitude
  Shifts perspective

Review:
Humor Bolsters Resilience by Producing Psychological Antibodies through the Experience of:
  Mirth: Emotional Antibodies
  Wit: Cognitive Antibodies
Defining Therapeutic Humor

Therapeutic humor is the intentional and purposeful use of humor that is specifically designed to create a health and wellness benefit for the receiver. The sender must experience three core human qualities (empathy, acceptance and genuineness), and the positive impact of the humor (physical, emotional, cognitive, and/or biochemical) must be at least minimally experienced by the receiver.

The Humor Creed

We hold These Truths to Be Self Evident
1. Humor is universal
2. Humor activates laughter—a physical experience
3. Humor activates mirth—an emotional experience
4. Humor activates "wit"—a cognitive experience
5. Not all humor is therapeutic
6. Humor may stimulate laughter but humor and laughter are distinctly different

The Humor Creed (cont)

We hold These Truths to Be Self Evident
7. There are physiological, emotional, cognitive, and physical benefits to therapeutic humor
8. It is beneficial to both offer and receive humor
9. Humor can be therapeutic, hostile/harmful, or neutral
10. Laughter and humor are not therapies but can serve as therapeutic interventions
11. Humor is a stimulus and/or experience but not an emotion, thought, or behavior. Humor may activate emotion, thought, and behavior
There to here...
Here to there...
Funny things are everywhere.

Dr. Seuss

Everybody’s got a laughing place.
Trouble is... most folks won’t take the time to look for it.

Br’er Rabbit

Training in Therapeutic Humor
- Receive humor
- Do/create humor
- See with comic vision
- Be selective when using humor—When you have a “humorous” moment choose to use or not to use humor
- Be active/practice using humor
- Record humorous moments
- Seek training opportunities and resources
Grin and share it.

Bonus Material

The following slides and material may not be covered in the presentation but are for your added information 😊

Toxins
Deplete Antibodies
(germs, poison, being criticized, being anxious)

Boosters
Increase Antibodies
(vegetables, pleasure, perspective, gratitude, HUMOR)

Physiology/
Biochemistry

Feelings/
Emotions

Cognitions/
Thoughts

Behaviors

NOTE: Toxins and Boosters are both internal and external
The Impact of Humor on Resilience
Physiological Immune System
Humor:
Boosts Biochemical System
Physiological Impact—
Increases Antibodies
Increases Pain Tolerance
Lowers Blood Pressure

Humor and Resilience
Humor fortifies resilience by:
Dissolving Emotional Distress
Reducing Negative thinking
Providing perspective for life’s encounters
Shifting Attitude
A Therapeutic Humor Professional uses humor for the purpose of benefiting others. The humor has several specific characteristics: 1. It is intentional; 2. It is purposeful; 3. It is offered with three fundamental giver qualities (empathy, acceptance, and genuineness).

Who Are Therapeutic Humor Professionals?

- Medical Professionals*
- Non-Medical Professionals*
- Lay persons*

*Who meet the definition of being a THP

Examples: Medical Professionals

A doctor who uses humor to reduce the tension of a patient who has white coat syndrome.

A psychologist who uses humor to teach clients how the experience of humor reduces emotional distress and changes thinking process.
The Therapeutic Humor Professional (THP)  
Who Are Therapeutic Humor Professionals?

Examples: Non-Medical Professionals

A teacher who purposely uses humor in the classroom to build rapport and a relationship with students.

A clown who purposely “clowns” with a child to reduce the stress and tension associated with having surgery.

Examples: Laypersons

A food kitchen volunteer who uses humor to help those in line feel connected and respected.

A cashier who uses humor to diffuse the anger and impatience of customers.
Survival of the Witty-est: Creating Resilience Through Humor

By Steven M. Sultanoff, Ph.D.


Just as our physical immune system protects us from toxins in our environment, our psychological immune system protects us from the toxins generated from psychological stressors we experience in the world around us. While the physical immune system produces antibodies to help protect us from biochemical toxins, the psychological immune system produces “antibodies” to help protect us from psychological toxins—often referred to as stressors.

Humor strengthens both our physical and psychological immune systems. The physical immune system is bolstered through biochemical changes such as an increase in immunoglobulin A during laughter. Humor helps to sustain the psychological immune system by altering how we feel, think, and behave.

Resilience is the ability of the human organism to spring back from stressors in the environment. As human beings we are resilient and, therefore, able to encounter stressors and return to our previous levels of functioning. In order to be resilient it is important that we “maintain” both our physical and emotional immune systems. Maintenance of healthy immune systems comes in many forms. Physical maintenance can be sustained through good nutrition, rest, and exercise. Emotional maintenance can be supported by sustaining realistic beliefs and attitudes about our world and possessing feelings of self-value and self-worth. By changing one’s biochemistry, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, humor can help build physical and emotional resilience as it stimulates the production of physical and psychological antibodies.

Impact of Stressors
As we experience distress, antibodies (whether physical or emotional) are utilized to help us cope with the stressor. Multiple stressors deplete our immune systems and, without a regeneration of antibodies, our systems become increasingly susceptible to emotional or physical toxins.

After the occurrence of each stressful event in our lives, our immune systems contain fewer antibodies. These antibodies, therefore, need to be regenerated. If a sufficient quantity and/or intensity of stressors persists and there is no opportunity for the immune systems to recharge, a “breakdown” occurs. Breakdowns may be in the form of distressing emotions, rumination, inability to work, physical ailments, etc. When our immune systems are compromised, emotional distress (such as excessive anger, depression, anxiety, guilt or resentment) or physical distress (such as colds, headaches, or stomach aches) often occur.
Creating Psychological Resilience
Humor not only helps relieve distress and fights environmental toxins when they occur, it also regenerates our “antibodies” so that the impact of the toxins is minimal. This regeneration bolsters antibody levels and helps sustain resilience. As we experience humor, we “stock up” on psychological antibodies. When a potentially stressful event occurs, psychological antibodies are then “activated” to address our emotional distress.

As mentioned above, humor changes our biochemistry as well as our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

1. **Biochemically**, humor has been shown to increase immunoglobulin A and decrease stress hormones. It has also been shown to increase our tolerance to pain.

   **The intensity of stress we experience is directly related to the way in which we perceive the stressor. Shakespeare stated, “Nothing is good or bad. It is thinking that makes it so.”**

2. **Cognitively**, humor helps break rigid thinking resulting in our ability to perceive the world more “realistically” and without distortions. Our emotional state is greatly influenced by our perception of the events around us. A stressor is not inherently stressful. The intensity of stress we experience is directly related to the way in which we perceive the stressor. Shakespeare stated, “Nothing is good or bad. It is thinking that makes it so.” Because one person’s view of a particular stressor influences the impact of that stressor, a variety of people experiencing the same stressor may have vastly different reactions—depending on the meaning they place on the stressor. For example, someone who feels excessive anger often believes that the world *must* treat him “fairly,” and when it does not treat him so, he becomes angry. Humor helps adjust this particular belief system by providing a more realistic perspective on an “unfair world.”

   Someone who experiences excessive anxiety often believes that she *must* perform well to be accepted or valued. When an environmental stressor challenges her performance, she experiences anxiety.

   Humor again can provide a clearer perspective placing her “performance” in a healthier relation to the specific environment so that the individual changes her thinking pattern from “I must perform to be okay” to “I would like to perform well, but I’m okay even when I don’t do as well as I hoped.”

3. **Emotionally**, humor not only relieves distressful feelings, but it helps teach us that we have the ability to “manage” our emotional states. One can’t experience distressing emotions such as anger, anxiety, depression, guilt, or resentment and experience humor at the same time. You may have heard someone who is very angry say, “Don’t make me laugh. I want to be angry.” You cannot maintain a high level of anger and laugh at the same time. When I asked one of my clients (who was very “dedicated” to her depression) what upset her about my “humorous” interventions she replied, “When you make me laugh, I do not feel depressed.” My humor momentarily relieved some of her depression which she seemed committed to maintaining! Humor and “distressful” emotions cannot *occupy* the same emotional/psychological space.
Since the experience of humor affects our emotions, we can learn to manage our emotional distress through humor. While humorous interventions may not remove chronic depression they can, for a few moments, relieve emotional upset, teaching us experientially that depression (as is true of other distressing emotions) can be lessened or temporarily relieved when we experience humor.

4. **Behaviorally**, humor can energize and recharge us and increase our desire and ability to choose activity over inactivity. We are more likely to greet and connect with others when we experience humor.

**Our Comic Vision**
We are more likely to live healthy and happy lives if we maintain our physical and emotional resilience. To do so we can develop our “comic vision”—a way of perceiving the world that allows us to be receptive to the humor around and within us. Heightened receptivity to humor can stimulate our ability to be increasingly interactive with, and even proactive toward, the world around us. In this way we increase our perception of humor—allowing it to help us manage our biochemical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral states.
If humor is "the best medicine," then how do we sustain it as a central part of our day-to-day lifestyle? While isolated humorous experiences where we fall over with laughter are an important aspect of the health potential of humor, the greatest benefits of humor lie in our daily ability to use humor to reduce emotional and physical distress which may ultimately lead to increased wellness.

**Jest for the Health of It**

Expanding our "comic vision" is one way to increase our humorous lifestyle. Comic vision is the ability to perceive the humor around us and begins with discovering what tickles our funny bone. Some of us enjoy jokes or cartoons while others find humor in daily incongruities such as seeing a sign in a store that reads, "Children left unattended will be towed at the owner's expense." Our comic vision expands as we then share our humor with others.

**Weave Your Web**

Surfing the internet can be a great adventure to expand our comic vision.

To locate a listing of many humor sites on the web, visit my web site at www.humormatters.com. At www.Joke_of_the_Day.com, you can join a mailing list and receive a new joke every day or, if you are really "serious about humor," you can explore the American Association for Therapeutic Humor at www.aath.org.

**Make a Prop-Position**

Props are a fun way to add humor to your lifestyle. Carry a clown nose for a week and wear it at least once a day. (I blow bubbles from my car while stopped at traffic lights or while waiting in line at a drive-through fast food restaurant.) For those of you who prefer a more subtle approach, try wearing a humorous pin or keeping a set of wind-up toys or koosh balls at your work station. A few moments of fun for you and your coworkers can result in renewed energy and help you deal with frustrating problems. Many novelty shops and toy stores carry a wide assortment of toys and pins for every taste. One of my favorites pins reads, "My reality check just bounced."
**Play with Your Mental Blocks**

Read signs around you and take meanings literally. For example, at the end of a cafeteria line in Las Vegas I read a sign that stated "We only accept US travelers checks." I turned to the cashier and said, "I guess I will have to put everything back. I only have cash!" The sign wasn't meant to be funny, but I read it literally, and it became funny (at least to me). By sharing my humor with the cashier, I attempted to lighten her day, as well.

**Commit Yourself**

Begin by committing yourself to do one thing in the next week to increase your comic vision and learn to share your "vision" with others. Carry and use a prop, learn and share a joke, e-mail something funny, make fun of yourself, exaggerate a situation, etc.

**What Tickles Your Funny Bone?**

As for your individual sense of humor, the question is not what is humorous, but what is humorous to you. The healing nature of humor is experienced through your wit, mirth, and laughter.

**Wit:**
*The Mental Experience of Humor*

As we experience wit we intellectually appreciate, understand, and "get" the humor. Wit helps us break up our rigid ways of thinking associated with emotional distress--such as depression, anxiety, and anger--it also helps us to see the world with perspective, thus reducing the impact of the stressors around us.

**Mirth:**
*The Emotional Experience of Humor*

Mirth is the experience of uplifting emotions such as joy, pleasure, or inner warmth associated with humor. Distressing emotions and mirth cannot occupy the same psychological space. As we experience mirth, our inner distresses dissolve and a pleasant, sunny spirit takes their place. We know this intuitively as illustrated by someone using humor "instinctively" to reduce another's anger. Many of us have been in a situation where, in the midst of being angry at a friend, our friend uses humor to dispel our emotional intensity. Some of us have even been known to say, "Don't make me laugh! I want to be angry."

**Laughter:**
*The Physiological Experience of Humor*

Laughter is the physiological reaction to humor. The research on laughter, while limited, indicates that there are physiological benefits from laughter including an increase in certain antibodies, a reduction of specific stress hormones, and an increased tolerance to pain. (I usually listen to humorous tapes on the way to see the dentist to reduce discomfort in the dentist's chair.)

By learning to tickle our respective funny bones, we stimulate our own, and possibly other's, wit, mirth, and laughter. As we strive to live a lifestyle incorporating humor, we lessen the emotional and physical stresses increasing our health and well being. Indeed, humor may be the best medicine to keep us emotionally, mentally, and physically fit.
The Necessary Conditions for the Presence of Therapeutic Humor in Helping Relationships
(A more detailed article has been published in the American Psychological Association Journal: Humanistic Psychologist, December, 2013)

By Steven M. Sultanoff, PhD

“Therapeutic humor” can be defined as the conscious and purposeful use of humor by a practitioner for the purpose of activating a positive therapeutic change in an individual’s behaviors, feelings, thoughts, or even physiology. It is the purposeful intention of using humor therapeutically, which distinguishes therapeutic humorists from comedians, class clowns, and other funny people.

Historically in the field of therapeutic humor, one critical missing piece has been the answer to the question, “What makes therapeutic humor therapeutic and how do practitioners create therapeutic humor to benefit others?” The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (2005) developed an outcome oriented definition which describes therapeutic humor as “Any intervention that promotes health and wellness by stimulating a playful discovery, expression or appreciation of the absurdity or incongruity of life’s situations. This intervention may enhance health or be used as a complementary treatment of illness to facilitate healing or coping, whether physical, emotional, cognitive, social or spiritual.” In this definition, therapeutic humor is “therapeutic” based on the outcome of the humor. If humor promotes health and wellness, then it is therapeutic. As an outcome oriented definition, it does not provide guidance on how we can create therapeutic humor. This definition suggests that humor is therapeutic when it has a positive outcome. However, therapeutically intended humor may not be experienced as therapeutic by the receiver. It would be impossible to know when the therapeutically intended humor is going to be rejected by the receiver. Without conscious and purposeful creation, and some guidance as to what makes therapeutic humor therapeutic, therapeutic humor remains random, and the sender has no basis from which to create a humorous, therapeutic intervention.

Carl Rogers (1957) suggested that four aspects must be present for a receiver to experience the therapy of the sender. The same four elements must be present for therapeutic humor to be present and experienced in a relationship. These four elements are 1) the skills of the sender, 2) the nature of being (embracing empathy/compassion, genuineness and acceptance); 3) the receptively of the receiver (being able to experience the sender); and 4) the bond of the relationship between the two.

1. Skills of the Sender

Humor skills like any other skills must be learned and incorporated into the therapeutic “set” of the sender. The sender must find ways to learn and practice humor interventions so that those skills become integrated into the sender’s interactions with others. Learning to effectively use humor takes practice.
2. Nature of the sender: Core qualities

In addition to being skilled in the use of humor, the sender of the humor must have conscious intent and embody three central core conditions or "ways of being". These ways of being are 1. Empathy/compassion; 2. Genuineness/congruence; and 3. Positive regard/acceptance.

Core conditions: the therapeutic ways of being.

1) Empathy.

The sender of the humor must experience compassion and caring for the receiver. Empathy embodies a "feeling" of understanding and compassionate sensitivity of the other person and of his/her situation in life.

2) Genuineness.

The sender of humor must experience genuineness or congruence within him/herself. Genuineness/congruence is the sense of internal consistency which will naturally result in presenting oneself as "real." There is no façade or phoniness in one’s being and therefore no phoniness in one’s presence. The sender of the humor is "real" and uses humor that is congruent with his/her way of being in the world. If the humor being used is incongruent, it will be experienced by the client/ receiver as fake, insincere, clumsy, and out of context.

3) Positive regard (acceptance).

The sender of the humor must embrace acceptance (positive regard) for the receiver. The humor is offered out of respect for the receiver and is specifically for the benefit of the receiver. The sender does not “judge” the receiver. The humor is not for the gratification of the sender by, for example, “teaching the receiver a lesson," correcting the receiver (hostile/judgmental), or sending a “corrective” message as in a hostile tease, but is for the purpose of (without bias or with minimal bias) activating the therapeutic process within the receiver. The humor is intended to benefit the receiver.

If these three conditions are present as an integral part of the sender then the relationship (as suggested by Rogers) will be a therapeutic one and the humorous interventions have the greatest potential to be beneficial.

3. Nature of the Receiver: The core qualities

The receiver must experience the core qualities (compassion, genuineness and acceptance) offered by the sender for the humor to be received as therapeutic. In addition to “experience” therapeutic humor the receiver must be able to perceive the intervention as humorous. To experience humor the receiver must perceive one or more of the universal stimuli that activate a humorous response. These stimuli that activate a humorous response include the experience of incongruity, ludicrousness, or ridiculousness, etc. (Sultanoff, 2002). If the client does not perceive a humorously intended intervention then, of course, it cannot have a humor based therapeutic impact. As Rogers suggests the receiver must “experience” the empathy, genuineness, and acceptance of the sender and in therapeutic humor must also “perceive” the humor as funny.
Blocks to receptivity.

The presentation of an intervention intended to be humorous does not guarantee that the receiver will perceive the humor. Occasionally receivers of humorous interventions are "locked in" to their present moments of thought or distress, and when locked in, they are unable to think "outside the box" which is essential in the perception of any humor. The narrow cognitive focus created by emotional distress may inhibit a receiver’s ability to perceive an intervention as amusing. Unless the receiver can perceive the incongruity, ludicrousness, or ridiculousness, etc. of a humorous trigger, then it is not going to be experienced as funny.

4. The Nature of the Relationship: Bond Between Sender and Receiver

The strength of the bond between the sender and receiver may enhance the experience of humor or may serve as a psychological buffer against a humorous intervention that is experienced by the receiver as unpleasant, uncaring or even hostile. The experience of the positive core conditions can reduce or even eliminate the negative filters that might impede the receiver from experiencing the intervention as funny. If the receiver does not perceive the sender’s empathy, genuineness, and accepting/non-judgmental presence; then the receiver may misinterpret the humor as uncaring, insensitive, or even hostile based on his/her automatic (unconscious) perception of the world.

Discussion

In summary, the experience of therapeutic humor is the result of an interaction between a practitioner who consciously and purposefully chooses the humor he/she uses based on specific behavioral skills including (the ability to create “funny” interventions), who embodies compassion, genuineness, and acceptance, and a receiver who processes and perceives the intervention through one of the universal triggers of humor (Sultanoff, 2002) and who is at least minimally receptive to the positive/therapeutic intervention of the sender. When all of these conditions are present, the likelihood of the therapeutic humor being perceived and received by the receiver is maximized.

References

